

RIGI RETREAT

DRAFT DISCUSSION PAPER I

Digitalization

Background and Context

Digitalization has become one of the central pillars of treaty body strengthening. It should not, however, be understood as a technical reform in isolation. Its significance lies in its contribution to a broader overhaul of the State party reporting procedure: moving from an episodic, document-heavy and largely Geneva-centred model toward a more predictable, digitally supported, regionally connected and follow-up-oriented review cycle.

In this broader architecture, digitalization provides the information infrastructure. Regionalization brings treaty body engagement closer to States, rights-holders, national implementation actors, NHRIs, civil society and UN country or regional presences. Predictable scheduling gives the system the rhythm needed for reviews and follow-up to occur regularly and coherently. The three elements are therefore mutually dependent: digital tools can support regional engagement and sustained follow-up, while predictable scheduling gives digital information flows a clear procedural purpose. In other words, digitalization represents the *information layer* of the whole reform package.

Today, the UN human rights treaty body system is undergoing a digital uplift as part of a broader effort to strengthen and modernize its working methods. This initiative aims to leverage digital tools and platforms to make the treaty bodies more efficient, accessible, and fit-for-purpose. It complements other reform pillars such as the adoption of a predictable reporting calendar, the harmonization of working methods and regionalization efforts. The push for digital transformation gained urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for treaty bodies to operate effectively online when in-person meetings were restricted. Indeed, the pandemic's disruptions underscored an *urgency to use digitalization for improved efficiency, transparency and accessibility* in the treaty body system.

More specifically, in June 2022, at their 34th annual meeting, the Chairs of the human rights treaty bodies unanimously proposed a set of reforms to strengthen the system. These reforms were built on three key pillars: (1) introducing an eight-year predictable cycle of State party reviews; (2) harmonizing and aligning working methods across all

Committees; and (3) a “digital uplift” of the treaty body system. In 2020, UN Member States had considered improvements to the treaty bodies, but the General Assembly’s resolution 75/174 merely “took note” of proposals without detailing budgetary support. The Chairs recognized that more decisive action - including digital transformation - was needed to address the chronic challenges facing the system, such as backlogs of reports and communications, resource constraints, and accessibility gaps.

To advance these reforms, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) was tasked by the Chairs to prepare a detailed implementation plan. OHCHR produced a Working Paper (29 May 2023) titled *“Options and guiding questions for the development of an implementation plan for the conclusions of the human rights treaty body Chairs at their 34th meeting in June 2022”*. This Working Paper – later updated with annexes in April 2024 – laid out technical options and questions for operationalizing the Chairs’ vision, including the digital uplift. The Chairs welcomed this Working Paper as a “comprehensive, detailed, and technical tool” to guide consultations on treaty body strengthening.

The evolution of the digital uplift should therefore be read together with the parallel development of predictable scheduling and more accessible forms of engagement. The key question is not only whether the treaty bodies can use more digital tools, but whether those tools can support a redesigned reporting cycle that is continuous, accessible, regionally connected and oriented toward implementation.

Over the past three annual meetings, the Chairs have progressively translated the digital uplift vision into concrete decisions and recommendations.

- **2023 (35th Chairs’ Meeting, A/78/354):** The thirty-fifth annual meeting of the Chairpersons of the human rights treaty bodies (New York, 29 May–2 June 2023) marked the first comprehensive discussion of the *Working Paper on options and guiding questions* prepared by OHCHR in May 2023, following the Chairs’ request at their 34th meeting in 2022. According to the report of the meeting (A/78/354), the Chairs used this session to examine the Working Paper in detail, including its sections on the eight-year predictable review cycle, the harmonization of working methods, and the digital uplift envisaged in the 2022 conclusions. Under the section “On digitalization”, the Chairs agreed on a clear set of technical and operational priorities (para. 91 (a)–(f)), endorsing the development of:
 - a **common accessible webpage** and a **user-friendly joint submission and document-management platform** for States parties (para. 91(a));
 - a **joint submission platform and digital case-management system** for individual communications and urgent actions (para. 91(b));

- **collaborative digital drafting tools** for treaty body members and Secretariat staff (para. 91(c));
- **automated compilation tools** for human-rights information across mechanisms (para. 91(d));
- **increased automation** of standard session documentation (para. 91(e); and
- **digital modalities for capacity-building activities** (para. 91(f)).

The Chairs stressed that these digital reforms are integral to making the system “stronger, more efficient and better equipped” to carry out its mandate, echoing language already used in their 2022 conclusions and reaffirmed in paragraph 45 of the 2023 report. They further highlighted the priority of creating a more modern and effective digital case-management system for individual complaints, mentioned explicitly during the consultation with States (para. 48). The Chairs also underlined that digital tools will directly support and enable the generalization of the simplified reporting procedure, confirming that SRP will become the default for all Committees (except CED and SPT) with the help of digital tools (para. 87). They noted that digital platforms will improve the timeliness, accessibility, and quality of reporting and review. During their consultation with States parties, numerous delegations also “highlighted the potential of digitization of the treaty bodies’ work” to improve efficiency, reduce duplication, and facilitate accessibility (para. 51).

The Chairs responded by urging all stakeholders to support the implementation of these reforms “on the basis of the OHCHR working paper” (para. 69). Finally, the Chairs drew attention to the resource implications of digitalization, calling on Member States to “increase human, technical and financial resources” to the United Nations Office at Geneva to ensure that hybrid and online meetings can be fully supported, including interpretation, sign language, and captioning (para. 92). They also reiterated concerns regarding chronic resource shortages affecting backlogs of reports and communications (paras. 37, 45).

- **2024 (36th Chairs’ Meeting, A/79/292):** By the time of the thirty-sixth annual meeting in June 2024, the Chairs moved from general agreement on the digital uplift to adopting specific implementation measures. Several digital-related reforms appear explicitly in the Chairs’ Conclusions (A/79/292, paras. 59–70), not as general aspirations but as operational decisions aligned with the revised OHCHR Working Paper (April 2024).

A major step concerned modalities for hybrid or online State party reviews. In paragraph 63(a), the Chairs agreed that Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) may request hybrid or online constructive dialogues, which the Committees will accommodate. For all other States, fully remote or hybrid reviews may be approved only in “exceptional circumstances”, defined in paragraph 63(b), and always on a case-by-case basis. They also established a preference for hybrid formats over fully remote participation, ensuring that the interactive nature of reviews is preserved (para. 63(c)). This section also sets out common criteria for postponements, handled separately under paragraph 64.

Digital tools also appear in relation to general comments. Under paragraph 68(d), the Chairs requested the development of a collaborative online drafting platform and accessible dashboard to support joint drafting of general comments, strengthening internal efficiency. The report also confirms the Chairs’ decision to strengthen inter-committee coordination using digital means. In paragraph 70(e), they call for the establishment of a secure digital information-sharing platform for the new Committees’ advisory mechanism on harmonization.

Throughout the meeting, Chairs emphasized that digital transformation must enhance accessibility, inclusion, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. They encouraged Committees to use online and remote modalities for intersessional coordination (para. 72), including virtual meetings, and highlighted earlier feedback from States on the Working Paper (paras. 33–39), noting that many States recognized the potential of digitalization.

Finally, consistent with the urgency expressed in 2023, the Chairs warned that effective implementation of the predictable calendar and digital uplift hinges on adequate, sustainable and predictable resources. They urged Member States to adopt in December 2024 a “conclusive” biennial General Assembly resolution with an adjusted resource formula (paras. 53–55).

- **2025 (37th Chairs’ Meeting, A/80/294):** The thirty-seventh annual meeting (Geneva, 2–6 June 2025) unfolded in the midst of a severe United Nations liquidity crisis that had drastically affected treaty body operations. The Chairs’ report details the extent of the disruption: session cancellations, recruitment freezes, the suspension of pre-sessional working groups, delays to 185 individual communications, and the postponement of 35 State party dialogues (paras. 57–63). These conditions made the Chairs’ longstanding calls for efficiency and innovation, especially digitalization, more urgent than ever.

In their 2025 discussions, the Chairs “underscored the critical role of digitalization in enhancing the efficiency and accessibility” of the system (para. 17). They welcomed OHCHR’s ongoing digital transformation efforts, including the modernization of the petitions procedure: 75% of all case files were already fully digital, and an increasing share of communications was being filed via the new portal (para. 17). The OHCHR Innovation and Analytics Hub also briefed the Chairs on additional areas where digital support could significantly improve operations, including for sessions, visits, reporting, follow-up, knowledge management, and outreach, while stressing that specialized technical expertise and additional resources were needed (para. 18).

The Chairs also explicitly recognized the potential of artificial intelligence, noting both its usefulness and the need to anchor any use of AI in a human rights-based normative framework (para. 20). Although the report does not detail specific AI applications such as automated summarization or duplicate-issue detection, it does confirm AI is being explored as part of OHCHR’s broader digitalization wave, including for accessibility enhancements and user-friendly platforms.

A major emphasis of the 2025 conclusions was digital accessibility. In para. 90, the Chairs reaffirm that accessibility must be integrated “from the conception of digital tools and systems,” including accessible user interfaces for blind and visually impaired members and stakeholders. They stressed that “no committee member should be excluded from digital tools and systems owing to disability.” This aligns with the broader 2025 discussion on ensuring inclusivity in online and hybrid modalities (paras. 22–23).

In a significant institutional request, the Chairs called on the General Assembly to “explicitly authorize the use of online or hybrid meetings with stakeholders during official meeting time”, a change that would require amending the current scope of GA resolution 68/268, whose paragraph 23 limits videoconferencing to dialogues with States (para. 91). This recommendation aims to formalize the pandemic-era practice of virtual engagement with NGOs, NHRIs, UN entities, and other experts as part of official sessions.

Finally, the Chairs again emphasized that resources determine the success of the digital uplift. In para. 90, they “highlight the importance of increased financial support” to unlock the potential of digital technology, including AI, to strengthen treaty body functions. Throughout the report, the Chairs repeatedly warn that technology alone cannot compensate for structural underfunding and the severe impact of the liquidity crisis on the system’s ability to deliver its mandated work (paras. 53–69). Their message was clear: digital transformation is now essential,

not optional, for the treaty bodies to remain operational and accessible in a context of shrinking resources but rising human rights demands.

Overall trajectory

Taken together, the period 2022–2025 traces a clear trajectory:

- **2022** – Digital uplift is defined as one of three core pillars of treaty body strengthening, and OHCHR is tasked with designing implementation options;
- **2023** – The Chairs endorse a concrete digital roadmap (common platforms, case management, automation, digital capacity-building);
- **2024** – Key digital reforms are translated into specific decisions on hybrid dialogues, centralized tracking, collaborative drafting tools, and digital coordination mechanisms;
- **2025** – Under severe financial pressure, the Chairs reaffirm digitalization (including AI) as essential to efficiency, accessibility and system resilience, while warning that its potential depends on robust and sustained resourcing.

This evolution shows a consistent pattern: digitalization is no longer treated as a technical upgrade, but as an indispensable condition for a predictable, accessible and credible treaty body system. Its strategic value lies in enabling the broader shift from a fragmented and document-heavy reporting model toward a more continuous, regionally connected and implementation-oriented review cycle. Digitalization provides the shared information environment within which predictable scheduling and regionalized follow-up can function effectively.

Feasibility of the Digital Uplift

The Chairs' progressive endorsement of digital transformation between 2022 and 2025 raises a central question for implementation: is the digital uplift technically, institutionally, normatively and politically feasible? For the purposes of the broader treaty body overhaul, feasibility should not be assessed only in terms of whether digital tools exist. The more important question is whether digitalization can support the wider reform architecture: predictable scheduling, more regionally connected engagement, and sustained follow-up between reviews.

From the vantage point of the Geneva Human Rights Hub (GHRH), whose ongoing projects specifically examine how AI and digital systems can strengthen human rights monitoring, the answer is both yes, in principle, and yes, but conditionally. The feasibility of the uplift depends on aligning emerging technological possibilities with institutional realities, data practices, ethical safeguards, and sustainable resourcing.

Technical Feasibility: the technologies exist, but infrastructure, consolidation and interoperability are constraints

The digital uplift proposed by the Chairs — centralized case management, collaborative drafting tools, automated document compilation, online training platforms and hybrid meeting infrastructure — does not require abstract future technologies. Many of the necessary components already exist, both within OHCHR and across the wider human rights ecosystem.

Within OHCHR, several initiatives already point in this direction. The OHCHR Innovation and Analytics Hub is advancing work on HRDx and broader human rights data systems. The Treaty Body Capacity Building Programme has developed and supported tools such as the National Recommendations Tracking Database (NRTD), which assist States in organizing, tracking and following up on human rights recommendations. The Dynamic Knowledge and Library Team, within the Methodology, Learning, Policy and Practice Section, is developing the Knowledge Gateway and broader knowledge-management approaches. Taken together, these initiatives show that OHCHR is already building many of the elements needed for a more digitally supported treaty body system.

Beyond OHCHR, the broader human rights ecosystem also demonstrates that the relevant technologies are already available:

- Integrated human rights databases, such as NRTD, IMPACT OSS, SIMORE Plus and Uwazi-based systems, already support structured data management.
- Case-management portals with workflow automation are standard across other UN bodies and regional courts.
- Generative AI is now capable of summarizing large documents, clustering issues, extracting themes, and improving searchability, all features presented in the 2025 AI for Good workshop as viable for human rights monitoring.

In short, the technical building blocks required for the treaty bodies' digital uplift are not hypothetical; they are already present in different parts of OHCHR and across the wider field. The main technical challenge is therefore not invention, but consolidation and interoperability.

Existing treaty body databases, online platforms, document repositories, petitions tools, recommendation-tracking systems and knowledge-management initiatives still operate too often in parallel. They are not always connected through common data formats, shared taxonomies or compatible interfaces. This fragmentation limits the system's

ability to reuse information across treaty bodies, across human rights mechanisms and across the reporting cycle.

Digital uplift is feasible only if the UN invests in:

- common data schemas;
- cross-committee interface standards;
- shared taxonomies for rights, issues, recommendations and implementation measures;
- modular platforms that can integrate over time.

The GHRH's mapping of digital human rights tracking tools shows that interoperability, not technology itself, is the determining technical constraint. This is also where digitalization connects directly to the regionalization agenda. If information remains fragmented across platforms, regional or national follow-up discussions will continue to depend on ad hoc documentation. If information is structured, searchable and reusable, regional engagement can be prepared more effectively, connected back to the formal treaty body process, and sustained between reviews.

The strategic opportunity is therefore to consolidate the significant work already underway across OHCHR into a more coherent office-wide approach, so that digitalization supports not only individual tools or databases, but the broader redesign of the treaty body reporting procedure.

Institutional Feasibility: a digital system requires new workflows, skills and governance

The 2022–2025 Chairs' decisions show a growing recognition that technology cannot simply be "bolted on" to existing analogue processes. GHRH's research and activities on digital human rights tracking tools and AI for human rights monitoring point in the same direction: digital systems are most effective when institutions adapt their workflows, clarify responsibilities and build the capacities needed to use them responsibly.

From the GHRH perspective, three shifts are essential:

- **Workflow standardization:** Digital tools depend on predictable steps, timelines and responsibilities. The Chairs' push for harmonization and predictable scheduling is therefore a precondition for successful digitalization. This is equally important for regionalization: regionally proximate engagement can only be credible if it is linked to the same procedural standards, information base and follow-up expectations as Geneva-based reviews.

- **Data governance clarity:** A digitally supported treaty body system requires clear rules on how information is entered, updated, validated and corrected. This becomes even more important where AI-assisted tools are used. Who validates AI-assisted outputs? How are errors identified and corrected? How is consistency ensured across Committees? These questions are institutional, not merely technical.
- **Digital skills:** Committee members and Secretariat staff need training not only on platforms, but also on responsible AI use, data protection, accessibility and digital literacy. GHRH's work in this area has shown both the need and the appetite for practical capacity-building among human rights professionals.

Digital uplift is therefore feasible, but only if institutional modernization runs alongside technological modernization. The OHCHR Innovation and Analytics Hub's presentation at the 2025 Chairs' Meeting mirrors insights from GHRH discussions: OHCHR has the mandate, expertise and institutional position to lead digital transformation, but system-wide data innovation will require clearer governance, stable resourcing and sustained internal capacity.

Normative Feasibility: digitalization must strengthen and not dilute the human rights mandate

The 2025 Chairs' reference to artificial intelligence marks a turning point: it signals that AI is no longer peripheral to UN human rights monitoring. The GHRH's assessment of feasibility aligns on three conclusions:

- AI can meaningfully support monitoring e.g., through document synthesis, timeline extraction, issue-tracking, identification of patterns, and improving accessibility.
- But without explicit normative safeguards, it can equally create opacity, bias, or undue delegation of human judgement.
- Feasibility thus depends on clear policies: transparency requirements, human-in-the-loop rules, risk assessments, documentation standards and ethical boundaries.

This is why the question on AI feasibility should not be framed as *"can we use AI?"* but *"how can AI be used in ways that reinforce legal standards, procedural fairness and the primacy of human expertise?"*

Furthermore, both the 2023 and 2025 Chairs' conclusions emphasize accessibility as a core requirement, not optional. GHRH's research shows that digital tools improve accessibility only when designed with:

- captioning and sign-language pathways,
- screen-reader compatibility,
- plain-language versions,
- low-bandwidth modes,
- multilingual interfaces.

If digitalization increases inequality of access, it is not normatively feasible. This remains a real risk unless accessibility is built from the start, as the Chairs' 2025 conclusions firmly underscore.

Political and Resource Feasibility: high Support, but vulnerable to resource politics

GHRH's research and engagement with States and practitioners suggest that digital modernization enjoys broad political support in principle:

- No State opposes digital modernization in principle.
- States appreciate the potential efficiencies, transparency, remote participation and reduced duplication.
- But discussions reveal a persistent hesitation to fund digital systems, especially those with long-term maintenance costs.

The political difficulty therefore lies less in accepting digitalization as an objective than in financing it as infrastructure. Digital systems require more than initial development. They depend on maintenance, cybersecurity, accessibility design, staff capacity, governance arrangements and long-term institutional ownership. This is where support can become more fragile.

This also raises the question of the role of private sector technology companies. OHCHR has already engaged with the technology sector, including through its past five-year partnership with Microsoft and, more broadly, through the B-Tech Project, which works with companies on applying the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to digital technologies and generative AI. Such engagement shows that technology companies can play a constructive role by providing expertise, technical support, responsible innovation practices and resources. At the same time, their role must be clearly governed: digital transformation of the treaty body system cannot involve outsourcing normative judgement, institutional ownership or data governance to private actors.

The central risk is therefore underfunded or externally fragmented digitalization: a situation in which States endorse digital reform decisions, but do not provide the resources required to make them operational, sustainable and institutionally owned. Reliance on ad hoc partnerships or private-sector support may help catalyse innovation,

but it cannot replace predictable public funding, clear procurement standards, data protection safeguards and human rights due diligence.

The political case should therefore be framed around infrastructure, not innovation alone. Digitalization is not an optional modernization add-on. It is one of the enabling conditions for a predictable, accessible and regionally connected review-and-follow-up cycle. Its feasibility is high at the level of principle but will depend on whether broad support for digital aspiration can be translated into sustained investment in digital infrastructure, complemented, where appropriate, by carefully governed engagement with responsible technology partners.

Overall Feasibility Assessment

Digital uplift is technically, normatively and operationally achievable. States do not oppose it in principle, the Chairs have established a coherent roadmap, and OHCHR already has important digital initiatives underway across different sections. The key question is therefore not whether digitalization is possible, but whether it can be consolidated, governed and resourced in a way that supports the broader transformation of the treaty body reporting procedure.

The digital uplift, as considered by the Chairs, is feasible in practice if five enabling conditions are met:

1. **Interoperable data systems:** common standards, modular platforms, shared taxonomies and tools that can communicate across Committees, mechanisms and levels of implementation.
2. **Institutional modernization:** harmonized workflows, predictable calendars, clear responsibilities and alignment between digital tools, reporting procedures, follow-up and regional engagement.
3. **Sustained resourcing:** stable funding, internal capacity, staffing for relevant OHCHR functions, long-term maintenance, cybersecurity and accessible digital infrastructure.
4. **Human rights-based AI and data governance:** transparency, accountability, accessibility, human oversight, data protection and clear limits on what digital or AI-assisted tools may support.
5. **Digital capacity-building and responsible partnerships:** training for Secretariat staff, treaty body members and external stakeholders, complemented where appropriate by carefully governed engagement with technology partners, without outsourcing institutional ownership or normative judgement.

The digital uplift is therefore feasible, but not self-executing. It requires political commitment, budgetary realism and institutional transformation, not only technological tools. Its strategic importance lies in the fact that it can provide the information infrastructure for the broader overhaul of the treaty body reporting procedure. Without digitalization, predictable scheduling risks remaining a calendar exercise, and regionalization risks remaining a set of ad hoc consultations or pilots.

With interoperable, accessible and responsibly governed digital systems, the treaty body system can move toward a more continuous review-and-follow-up cycle, in which information is updated, reused and connected to implementation across Geneva, regional and national levels. The challenge is therefore not the technology itself, but aligning resources, governance, institutional capacity and political will to make digitalization serve systemic reform.

Potential questions for discussion

- How can digital tools reduce dependence on static State party reports and support reviews even where reports are delayed, outdated or absent?
- How can digitalization support regionalization, including regional consultations, national follow-up discussions and engagement with UN country teams, NHRIs and civil society?
- What safeguards are needed to ensure that AI supports, but does not replace, human legal analysis, Committee deliberation and institutional judgement?
- What role, if any, should private sector technology companies play in supporting treaty body digitalization, and how should such engagement be governed?
- What elements of digital infrastructure, interoperability, AI governance and sustainable financing should be included in a future General Assembly resolution?